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ABSTRACT

Arguments commonly made against distance education systems and the merits of these contentions are considered. It is suggested that when plans to establish a distance teaching university are announced, a common reaction is the view that it will never work. The conduct of distance teaching, which is visible in printed materials and audible in broadcasting, is open for all to examine and to judge. It is noted that opportunities for students to undertake practical work can be provided by distance teaching systems. Distance teaching universities have recognized the limitations of the distance system by concentrating their efforts primarily on generalist rather than specialist degree programs. Although the notion that learning at a distance is easier than learning by conventional methods is popular, the courses studied at a distance are not easier; they differ essentially in the means by which they are taught. The course standards for distance education are comparable with those in the conventional system. Advisory bodies monitor academic standards and teaching staff and evaluators for distance education. The structured learning materials of distance education systems facilitate the assimilation of content. It is suggested that at the time of graduation, distance learning students can achieve levels of attainment the same as or higher than their peers who have studied full-time on campus. What is unique about students in distance teaching universities is that they are typically adults already in full-time employment, and many distance students study for reasons unrelated to employment. Contrary to popular belief, distance education is not cheap. (SW)

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DERG Papers
Number 1

THE CREDIBILITY OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

by

John Dodd

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The Open University
Distance Education Research Group

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The Credibility of Distance Education

"When, in late 1968 and early 1969 I gave talks about the Open University to universities, to adult education groups, or, indeed, to any audience whatsoever, the reaction was entirely predictable. There was at the beginning profound scepticism, garnished with ridicule and hostility; and by the end, if ove was lucky, the garnish might have disappeared and the scepticism might be a little less profound".[1]

Scepticism, ridicule, hostility - why does the system of distance education attract such negative reaction when plans to launch the system are announced? What are the grounds on which the distance system is damned?

In this paper, and in the particular context of distance teaching universities, I want to identify some of the arguments which are commonly marshalled against the system of distance education, and to consider the extent to which the arguments are tenable without qualification.

It will never work

When plans to establish a distance teaching university are announced, a common reaction to the announcement is *"it will never work"*.

But distance teaching universities do work, have worked for years, in countries all over the world, and in different local and national contexts. Distance teaching universities are operational in the UK, in Canada, Australia, Costa Rica, Venezuela, Spain, Germany, Israel, Pakistan, India ... to name only a selection of countries. That they work ie are operational, is beyond dispute. That they work *effectively* is quite a different question.

What does the term 'work' (or 'effectively') mean? Do conventionally - teaching universities 'work' 'effectively'?

It will never be as good as conventional university teaching

Is conventional university teaching really so 'good'? For example, is it 'good' that lecture theatres in conventional universities are frequently overcrowded; that the primary activity of students during the delivery of a lecture is to scribble into their notebooks as fast as they can; that the best of conventional teaching should be restricted to a small and elite audience; that the worst of conventional teaching should continue, year after year, to be protected from scrutiny and criticism by the privacy of the closed classroom?

But to argue these and other limitations of conventional university teaching does not justify an alternative system (distance education) whose merits may be no greater. So along side the limitations of conventional university teaching suggested above, what are the merits of the distance teaching system?

Unlike the conduct of teaching in conventional universities, the conduct of distance teaching (visible in printed materials and audible in broadcasting) is open for all to examine and to judge. When the learning materials are created by teams of specialists, the final products represent the efforts and expertise not of one individual lecturer but of many contributors - academic content specialists, educational broadcasters, instructional designers, professional editors - the fruits of whose combined talents can be made available to thousands of students unrestricted by place or time. The learning activities in which the distant student can be involved - reading, writing, listening

to broadcasts, using audio-visual aids, attending face-to-face tutorials, doing practical work - can certainly be as 'good' (demanding, varied, enriching) as the learning activities of the conventional student.

Skills and practical subjects cannot be taught at a distance

This is another assertion which is too bold at face value:

- *terminology*

  There are skills of exposition, skills of observation, skills of deduction, skills of manipulation ....

  The need is to establish which skills are in question (and the most likely response will be those skills in the psychomotor domain).

- *media*

  The assumptions underlying the assertion are (i) that print is the only medium of instruction in distance education; (ii) there is no opportunity for students to undertake practical work; (iii) psychomotor skills cannot be taught through the medium of print only.

  Opportunities for students to undertake practical work *can* be provided by distance teaching systems, at home using common household materials or specially prepared audio visual aids and experiment kits; at local centres during day schools and weekend schools; at conventional universities and other institutions during residential study programmes

- *time*

  Generally far less time is spent by distance students on practical work than by conventional students working in university laboratories. However, *"Most scientists would agree that you can't learn science*

without doing things in laboratories or in the field. It is only when you start asking <u>what</u> things should be done, and, more particularly, <u>why</u>, that you really begin to get the measure of this problem. If you take 20 science professors at random and ask them to say why they have their students spend hours and hours in the laboratory, you will probably detect some common ground. But if you ask them to rank their reasons in order of importance and apply a correlation test to their replies, you will be disappointed if you expect to get anything coherent at all"[2]

Certainly the case for *laboratory-based* work and the time devoted to it in conventional universities is open to challenge.

- *application*

Some psychomotor skills *can* be taught through the medium of print only (consider, for example, do-it-yourself books). So the argument concerns not skills in general but skills for particular application.

Special purpose skills such as those practised by surgeons, engineers and other specialists, cannot be taught effectively through the medium of print only. Nor indeed can literacy, or language pronunciation, or many other skills. Distance teaching universities have recognised the limitations of the distance system in concentrating their efforts primarily on generalist rather than specialist degree programmes. The system does not claim to match the conventional system in all respects.

Distance learning is a soft option

The notion that learning at a distance is 'a soft option' (that is, easier than learnirg by conventional methods) is popular amongst those who have never studied at a distance or seen how distance learning is

organised. The presumptions upon which the assertion is based seem to be these:

- *the workload is less; the distant student works fewer hours than the conventional student*

  When the UK Open University was established, comparability with the workload of a student in one of the ancient Scottish universities was a critical factor in the decision to teach OU courses over a period of 36 weeks each year.

  > *"We estimated that an average student at a Scottish University might be expected to work about 30 hours a week over a period of 26 weeks each year. This would include the time he spent in contact with teachers, plus private study and reading. So he would work about 800 hours each year making a total of 2400 hours (over 3 years) for an ordinary degree.."*[3]

  To gain a UKOU ordinary degree, students are required to obtain 6 course credits, each credit involving *approximately* 400 study hours, as illustrated below:

> *UKOU Study Hours:*
>
> *6 credits to be equivalent to 2 400 hours*
> *→ 400 hours per credit*
> *Less 40 hours for one week residential Summer School work*
> *→ 360 hours for 36 weeks → 10 hours per week*
>
> *Of course the comparison is not really so simple or exact. Not all OU courses have Summer School, for instance. And actual experience has shown that we underestimated the weekly workload - the average is nearer 13 hours than 10. On the other hand, we have found it necessary to reduce the number of weekly learning packages (which we call 'course units') from 36 to 32, so the average workload for a full-credit course is something like 416 hours (13 x 32) rather than 360 hours (10 x 36). The point is that approximate comparability with Scottish universities in terms of total workload would require six credits for an ordinary degree.*[3]

Comparative studies of student workload in the conventional universities have been similarly undertaken by, for example, the *Universidad Nacional Abierta* in Venezuela, and by the *Universidad Estal a Distancia* in Costa Rica. A number of distance teaching universities have, therefore, taken particular care to ensure that the workload of their distance students is comparable with that of conventional students.

Nevertheless, it is true that in general, the number of study hours expected of part-time adult students learning at a distance is fewer than the hours of study *expected* of full-time students attending a conventional campus university. But to conclude from this that distance students work less hard would be a mistake. If 'hard' describes the *pace* and *intensity* of study, the pace and intensity of distance learning is certainly equivalent to, and many would argue greater (harder) than that involved in learning by conventional methods. Studying at a distance in isolation, during evenings and weekends at the sacrifice of leisure time, and over a period of several years, demands exceptional commitment and determination. If distance learning were truly a soft option, wouldn't fewer students drop out?

- *the courses are (intellectually) easier*

Some distance teaching universities - for example Athabasca University in Canada, Deakin University in Australia, and most of the universities involved in distance teaching in India - offer courses whose content and level is essentially the same as that of courses followed by their full-time on-campus students. The on-campus and off-campus students sit the same end of year examination. The courses studied at a distance are not (intellectually) easier;

they differ essentially in the *manner* by which they are taught.

Distance teaching universities which cater solely to off-campus students have developed new courses whose structure and content are quite different to courses taught in the conventional universities. The mechanisms (rituals?) these universities have introduced to establish course standards comparable with those in the conventional system are familiar. They include:

- the appointment of distinguished academics and educationalists in the conventional system to the governmental body responsible for planning the establishment of the new distance teaching university
- the appointment of an Academic Advisory Committee whose task is to ensure that the distance teaching university's academic standards conform to those of other (usually conventional) institutions
- the appointment to the university of full-time teaching staff with qualifications and experience, and with conditions of employment, comparable to those of teaching staff in the conventional universities (the primary source of recruitment)
- the representation on interview boards of external academics and educationalists distinguished in the field relevant to the recruitment activity
- the appointment of external authors, assessors, tutors, assignment markers and examiners who are employed full-time in conventional higher education and are therefore well able to judge on a comparative basis what the standard of teaching and learning (at a distance) should be

- the establishment of advisory panels representative of external professional bodies and associations

Given this number and variety of mechanisms, there can be the same comparability of standards between a course taught in a distance teaching university and one taught in the conventional universities as there is between two courses taught in two different conventional universities.

- *the students are spoonfed*

Some critics appear to believe that because distance teaching is structured, defines explicitly the students' learning objectives, and seeks to convey information without ambiguity, teaching at a distance is a process of 'spoonfeeding' students. Presumably the corollary of this arguement is that teaching should be unstructured, without defined objectives, waffling and confused (as in the conventional universities?)

Well-structured learning materials facilitate the assimilation of content. The intent is to make study easier - but not at the cost of superficiality, glibness, distortion. A great many - too many - distance teaching texts are devoid of student activity. But those which are well designed are notable for the constant demands they make upon the student's intellect and initiative in, for example, answering in-text questions, self-assessment questions and formally assessed multiple choice questions *in addition to* writing essays in the same way as conventional students do (exclusively?)

Conventional students massed in crowded lecture rooms may in fact be *more* prone to spoonfeeding than distance students interacting *individually* with self instructional multi-media learning materials. In face-to-face tutorials, adult distance learning students are

renowned for their *active* participation.

- *the students are academically inferior*

The notion is that students enrol in a distance teaching university only because they are not sufficiently well qualified academically to gain a place in a conventional university. The supposition is that distance students remain academically inferior throughout the period of their studies.

Admission to universities which require pre-entry academic qualifications is debarred to those who lack the qualifications or whose standard of attainment is lower than that of their peers. If the term 'inferior' is used to describe the level of formal academic attainment *at the point of university entry*, then the level of attainment of many distance students is indeed 'inferior' *at the point of entry*. This is not however the *only* reason that students enrol in distance learning. Adult students in particular are positively attracted by the convenience and independence of studying at a distance; though they may be academically qualified and able to enter a conventional university, many *prefer* to study in a distance teaching university.

At the point of exit (ie. graduation), distance learning students can achieve levels of attainment the same as or higher than their peers who have studied full-time on campus. At Deakin University in Australia "*comparison of the results of on-campus and off-campus students taking the same course has revealed that the off-campus students fare no worse than the on-campus students. Indeed, they do slightly better. The difference is marginal but rather consistent across different courses*"[4]

The students will cheat

The notion is that the assignments completed by students at a distance may not be their own work; that local copying amongst students will be widespread.

In reality, because distance learning students are geographically dispersed, the opportunity for one student to copy another's work is more limited than on a conventional, residential campus. In those systems in which students are in regular contact with a local tutor through their assignments and in face-to-face meetings, the student-tutor relationship can be sufficiently personal to enable the tutor to detect unexpected variations in the student's performance. Most systems combine continuous assessment with conventionally invigilated examinations. If there is a wide discrepancy in performance on examination and on continuous assessment, a *viva-voce* examination can be conducted to decide which performance truly reflects the student's knowledge and ability.

'Cheating'over a three-year or longer study period is unlikely to be sustained. And a limited degree of local copying (co-operation?) may positively aid individual learning.

Massive dropout = massive waste

Large numbers of students do drop-out of distance learning. But it is equally true that large numbers of students graduate - and in far greater numbers than graduate from most conventional universities. (In the UK, 45000 Open University students have graduated. Over 5000 students graduate *each year*.)

The investment of resources in students who drop-out is substantial, but is marginal in comparison with the investment of resources in

the majority of students who continue. (In the UKOU, about 75% of new students provisionally registered in January for what amounts to a three month trial period, continue their studies beyond April, the date of final registration.)

If access to higher education is held to be a universal entitlement, those distance teaching universities which operate open admissions policies are attempting to fulfil this aim to a greater extent than conventional universities which admit only those with formal pre-entry qualifications. In a democratic society equality of opportunity (at the risk of high drop-out) is preferable to elitism. And the effort and resources expended on students who drop out is waste only if the gain to the students is nil.

We don't need more graudates

The argument is that society has only a limited need for highly educated people. Great dissatisfaction will be caused if graduates cannot gain employment commensurate with their qualifications.

How far educational provision should be geared to employment opportunities is debateable. What is unique about students in distance teaching universities is that they are, typically, adults already in full-time employment. Graduates of the distance teaching universities do not therefore necessarily swell the numbers of graduate unemployed produced by the conventional universities. Moreover, many distance students study for reasons wholly unrelated to employment.

If employers fail to recognise, through accelerated promotion and other means, the potential demonstrated by employees in gaining degree level qualifications through part-time distance study, dissatisfaction amongst the employees concerned may well result. The cause, however, lies more

with the attitude of employers than with the distance teaching system.

Education on the cheap

Contrary to popular belief, distance education is *not* cheap (the Government grant to the UKOU for 1981 is £45,000,000). What the system claims is that the cost of producing a graduate *can be cheaper* by distance teaching than by conventional teaching methods.

Conclusive evidence of the lower cost of distance education is not easy to assemble. There are differences of opinion over what should be the cost criteria in comparing conventional and distance teaching systems; few exhaustive cost studies of distance teaching universities are available from which to draw evidence; those cost studies which are available use jargon and formulae which are baffling to the most enlightened of readers. As Perraton[5] has remarked, "Its easy to ask the question : are correspondence courses a cheap alternative to school or college education? Its more difficult to answer". Clearly, more (and more intelligible) cost studies of distance teaching and conventional teaching universities are needed to enable the claims of either system to be substantiated.

Distance education encourages the centralisation of curriculum control

The fear is of control by the State (ie. the Big Brother Syndrome). The supposition is that all those who are associated with the distance teaching university - its permanent academic staff, its external academic staff employed as authors, assessors, tutors, script markers, examiners, and its students (typically mature adults) - will be totally blind to or wholly passive in the face of the 'control' which the State is deemed to want to exercise.

On a topical note, the establishment of the Free University of Iran by Imperial decree in 1973 does not appear to have secured the position of those exercising power at the time of (and since) its establishment.

Conventional universities can be subject to curriculum control through central (state) funding policies. Much of conventional university teaching is based upon the use, throughout all universities of *standard* textbooks and reference works. And in some respects, the exercise of greater central control over university curricula to match priority national needs may not be wholly undesirable.

Concluding remarks

My aim in this paper has been two-fold. Firstly, I have identified some of the arguments which are commonly marshalled against the system of distance teaching, in universities in particular. Secondly, I have tried to show, not how the arguments can be dismissed, since no system is faultless, but how the substance of the arguments needs to be explored to enable a more solid basis for judgement.

Some distance teaching universities are now well established. Elsewhere the need persists to establish the distance system as an acceptable *alternative* to conventional educational provision.

To re-quote Walter Perry:

'There was at the beginning profound scepticism, garnished with ridicule and hostility; and by the end, if one was lucky, the garnish might have disappeared and the scepticism might be a little less profound'.

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1. To pursue research and development work on specific aspects of distance education in an international context.

2. Disseminate knowledge concerning distance education practices and systems.

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